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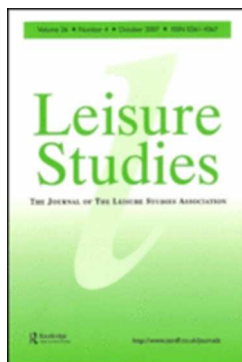
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**Politics at Play: Locating Human Rights, Refugees and  
Grassroots Humanitarianism in the Calais Jungle**

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**Title:**

Politics at Play: Locating Human Rights, Refugees and Grassroots Humanitarianism in the Calais Jungle

**Abstract:**

This article examines the political footprint of a new wave of grassroots humanitarian organisations in the informal refugee camp, popularly dubbed ‘The Jungle’, in Calais, northern France. Set against the formal humanitarian void created by the French state barring of international aid agencies, and the abject conditions of camp life, we trace the shifting socio-spatial remit and progressive politicisation of these ‘apolitical’ organisations as they encounter a crisis of human rights in the Jungle, prior to its violent demolition by state decree in October 2016. In foregrounding the organisational perspectives of Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service, and their unorthodox deployment of play, sport, cinema and art, we reveal a grassroots humanitarian praxis which offers an alternative to the large-scale ‘professionalized’ registers of aid delivery. By virtue of their relative informality, spatial proximity and volunteer activism, these grassroots organisations not only stand in tension with the violent border sovereignties of neoliberal states, but open up the inchoate possibility for political struggle and refugee-centred claims-making over the right to inhabit the ‘exceptional’ space of the camp.

**Key words:** Grassroots Humanitarianism, Human Rights, Refugee Camp, Play, Sport, Calais

**‘WE ARE HUMAN’**



**Figure 1.** Refugees united ahead of a football tournament in the Calais Jungle.

(Source: Adam Corbett, March 2016)

Just as the game got underway, several heavily-armed riot police approached on the horizon. It was March 2016, and a brisk spring morning in the sprawling camp settlement, popularly dubbed ‘The Jungle’, on the outskirts of Calais, northern France. It had been only days since the last teargas attack violently interrupted play, and Tommy feared the worst for the two-dozen young refugees – including

unaccompanied minors from Sudan, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Syria – who sought to enjoy an-all-too-brief moment of escape from the abject conditions of camp life. Much to his surprise, however, several tense minutes passed without incident – the only drama triggered by an on-field scuffle among adrenaline-fuelled teammates. Even then, the riot police stood silently, weapons in-hand as they watched on from the side-lines of the barren sandy clearing. ‘For the first time’, uttered Tommy, ‘it was like they saw these people as other guys who like football just like them as opposed to refugees’.

A few days later, having eventually been granted entry through the police-patrolled, 16-feet razor wire fences, Alix excitedly joined Tommy in the camp, her rental van labouring under the weight of generous donations of clothing, books and sports equipment. Both had taken great pride in forcing through the construction of a new sports field on the outer margins of the camp, and for the first time since founding the grassroots humanitarian initiative, Play4Calais, Alix could see the impact of their efforts to bring ‘pop-up cinema, safe play, sports and vital aid’ to the thousands of refugees who called the makeshift camp home. But as they unloaded the van and began distributing custom-made tee-shirts emblazoned with the words, ‘WE ARE HUMAN’, Alix noticed a problem. ‘Shoes!’, she exclaimed, recalling the harrowing sight of young refugees stood barefoot on the side-lines of the new field:

‘The French police were stealing people’s shoes at night! We’d show up and people that we had given shoes to just weeks earlier had them confiscated, just like the Nazis did to the Jews during the Holocaust... You’d have to have fleeces for them if it was cold as they’d have their jumpers confiscated too. There are no rules there, it is like outlaw land and the police make it up as they go. They consider refugees third class citizens and they treat them as such’.

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Six months later, in early October 2016, the French authorities ordered the violent demolition of the Calais Jungle settlement, forcing a swelling population of thousands – many of whom had fled persecution and war across the Middle East and North Africa – to seek refuge in makeshift camps dotted along the coastal hinterland of northern France. With many refusing to abandon hopes of seeking asylum in the UK, hundreds made desperate nightly attempts to breach the towering chain-link fences that run for miles around the Eurotunnel complex: many perished falling off trains or crushed by lorries; others suffered grievous injury in bruising clashes with border police; countless minors remained unaccounted for amid rumours of child trafficking (Brimelow, 2016). At the same time, an uneasy British-French alliance ploughed millions into securitising border controls, renewing razor wire fences and increasing the patrols of riot police (Moulds, 2017a; Rigby and Schlembach, 2013). For Alix, however, the much-publicised destruction of the camp marked but the latest act of a long-running regime of state violence in the Calais Jungle, which – reaching back to the closure of the ‘official’ Sangatte refugee centre in 2002 – was not a formally sanctioned United Nations refugee camp (King, 2016; Mould, 2017b). Rather, as one journalist remarked, it was merely ‘a camp full of refugees’ – a distinction which had long allowed the French state to renounce any juridical obligation to recognise the rights of refugees to adequate housing,

food and asylum (as ratified in the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees), while formally barring the entry of humanitarian aid agencies<sup>1</sup> such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR).

Recalling the dehumanising effects of such a veto, Alix described the trauma and suffering of camp life: of unprovoked teargas attacks in the children’s playground; of families living in fear of violent night raids; of abrupt demolitions of the Women’s and Children’s Centre and the Good Chance Theatre; of racial profiling and abuse, normalised violence and harassment. And yet, she also applauded the many grassroots initiatives and volunteer charities which sought to fill the humanitarian void. Of these, most aspired towards what Redfield (2005, p. 344) terms a ‘minimalist biopolitics’, namely the temporary preservation of survival through basic medical treatment, clean water and nourishment. Others, however, which are brought into sharp focus in this article, served as projects of escapism, empowerment, and child protection, operating within an expanded temporal horizon through interventions that sought to reshape the socio-cultural geographies of camp life. Collectively, we argue, in countering the exclusionary state practices that govern the biopolitical terrain of the camp, these grassroots initiatives also assumed blurred responsibilities as the primary duty-bearers for the most basic rights of refugees – precisely the figure, in Diken’s (2004) terms, who brings to light the fundamental tensions between ‘apolitical’ principles of humanitarian intervention, the much-proclaimed ‘universality’ of human rights, and their mutual conditionality vis-à-vis the sovereign power of the French nation-state.

The opening vignettes serve as a critical point of entry into the lived realities of this paradox, which Zizek (2002, p. 91) aptly captures when he argues that any act of humanitarian intervention in refugee camps necessarily reveals the ‘two faces, ‘human’ and ‘inhuman’, of the same socio-logical formal matrix’. In both cases, he concludes, irrespective of moral virtue, the refugee becomes an ‘object of biopolitics’, with many reduced to what Agamben (1998) termed the *homo sacer* – namely the figure whose life is forcibly stripped ‘naked’ of biography, rights and citizenship such that they may be subjected to physical and symbolic violence without legal recourse. In the ‘outlaw land’ of the Calais Jungle, as Alix reveals, the refugee is thus neither included nor excluded but rather held in an indeterminate ‘zone of indistinction’ – their bare life exposed beneath the impotent language of rights and rendered dependent on a humanitarian struggle which ultimately seeks to reimagine – even reconstitute – the camp as a social and political space. But what (political) role do ‘apolitical’ grassroots humanitarian initiatives serve in the geographies of camp life? And how are we to appraise the humanitarian potential of physical cultural forms such as play, sport, arts and cinema in contexts where even the ‘right to have rights’ (Arendt, 1951) is suspended?

In this article, these critical questions are deployed towards a number of empirical and conceptual ends. Most notably, we seek to contribute to a growing interdisciplinary literature on the camp not merely as a biopolitical ‘space of exception’ (Agamben, 1998), and hence of dehumanising state violence, but as a contested social and political terrain – one in which ever-changing hierarchies of inclusion and rights are produced and policed, but also negotiated and subverted by a multiplicity of actors via situated forms of

resistance, conflict and claims-making (Feldman, 2012; Redclift, 2013; Rygiel, 2011; Sigona, 2015). To do so, we argue, is to adopt a decentred angle of vision onto the ‘socio-logical formal matrix’ of the humanitarian condition, moving beyond the reductionist tendency to valorise humanitarian action as an absolute moral and ‘apolitical’ praxis of ‘doing good’ (Feldman, 2012; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2012) – a tendency which is further amplified by ‘mythopoeic’ constructs of sport as a social panacea in the development field (Coalter, 2013). In sociological shorthand, then, much as we are concerned with the ‘social life of rights’ (Wilson, 2006) as opposed to their universal discursive circulation, we also aspire to shed light on the social and material encounters through which the localized remit and performative footprint of Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service have taken shape, and shape-shifted, vis-à-vis the exigencies of crisis in the Calais Jungle.

### Decentring Humanitarianism

Scholarly narratives which document, preserve or curate the patchwork histories of humanitarian action are few. Owing to the temporal and spatial insecurity that marks so-called ‘states of emergency’ (Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010), those histories that do exist have largely been inscribed through a retrospective political prism or through grand media narratives of crisis, risk and state conflict (Taithe and Borton, 2016). The silences that punctuate these historical accounts thus reveal a politics of scale and perspective – a politics which not only privileges the ideological machinery of large-scale humanitarian institutions over the voiceless figure of the refugee but renders unseen the individual and collective experiences of volunteers, charities and NGO’s who shape the vernacular enactments of more ‘grassroots’ forms of humanitarianism *in situ*. Methodologically, in this article, we seek to decentre such dominant narrations of humanitarian history by foregrounding the organisational perspectives of two grassroots initiatives, Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service<sup>2</sup>.

Aligned with extant knowledge on the (in)formalised making and unmaking of humanitarian interventions (Redfield, 2005; Sandri, 2017), we draw on a diverse repertoire of qualitative materials – including semi-structured interviews, images, media artefacts and discourse analysis – collected over the ‘life-course’ of their institutional presence in the Calais Jungle from late 2015 onwards. Semi-structured interviews were initially conducted with selected key informants – including the founding members – of three grassroots organisations, before the decision was taken to prioritise a more focused examination of Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service following the camp closure in October 2016. With the authors holding no active professional or volunteer role within either organisation, these interviews were conducted in the UK when key informants were on temporary leave or having returned permanently from Calais.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the violent destruction of the camp provided the most critical moment in shaping our methodological direction. Thereafter, as both organisations underwent a sudden process of withdrawal and unmaking, questions concerning the historical politics of what is remembered and what is forgotten amid humanitarian crisis came to the fore. In an effort to document organisational narratives



that might otherwise have been lost, much of our empirical focus adopted a testimonial form - as an act of ‘bearing witness’ (c.f. Davies and Isakjee, 2015) not only to the oft-unspoken injustices and violence of the Jungle as a historical space, but to the progressively political reframing of volunteer ethics and humanitarian values over the course of the timeline in question. What comes into view through the critical analysis of these oral testimonies and ‘insider’ accounts should not be read as a neat chronicle of organisational operations but rather as a particular and deeply partial angle of vision onto the limits, lessons and contradictions of a novel humanitarian form as it manifests in the Calais Jungle.

**Beyond Bare Life in the Calais Jungle**

‘On the territory of this nation, the law of the jungle cannot endure’  
Eric Besson (French Immigration Minister, September 2009)

Reaching back over two decades, the borderland geographies of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region in northern France have assumed heightened socio-moral and political significance – both as a makeshift home to thousands of asylum seekers planning the last leg of their journeys to the UK, and as a flash point of international geopolitical wrangling on immigration, border controls and the rights of refugees. In 1999, at the request of the French state, the Red Cross first opened the Sangatte Centre as an official humanitarian response to migrant in-flows from Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, before severe overcrowding<sup>3</sup> and political fallout between France and the UK led to its closure in December 2002. Since then, a frequent stream of asylum seekers have endured amidst a recurring cycle of informal occupation and police violence, with small outdoor camps minus water or sanitation services – popularly known as ‘jungles’ – frequently bulldozed by state decree. Accordingly, the refusal of the French state to declare the site an official refugee camp led to the subsequent ban on formal humanitarian assistance – a void filled only by local charities and activist groups who supported refugees through basic provisions of food, clean water and warm clothing<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the overtly repressive efforts of the French state – including the violent demolition project which sparked the polemical comments of the French Immigration Minister, Eric Besson, in 2009 – the so-called Calais Jungle camp expanded rapidly in recent years as a deepening Mediterranean migrant crisis and conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa pushed refugees northwards from Europe’s southern frontier (UNHCR, 2015). By early 2016, intensified scrutiny from international media declared a state of humanitarian crisis in the camp, where a swelling population approaching 10,000 inhabitants<sup>5</sup> endured amidst cramped living conditions<sup>6</sup>, inadequate sanitation services, and scant access to clean water (Hargreaves, 2016). Equally vociferous were condemnations from human rights activists – including Human Rights Watch (2017) and the Refugee Rights Data Project (2017) – on the brutality of police violence and the refusal of access to legal asylum assistance from human rights lawyers (Bulman, 2016). Taken together, these condemning accounts sought to disrupt the prevailing state construct of the Calais site as a sovereign ‘territory of exception’ (Fassin, 2005, p. 381) existing beyond any politico-legal or

constitutional obligation to humanitarian and refugee law, or the fundamental protections of human rights.

It is against this 'exceptional' suspension of law and rights that Giorgio Agamben posits 'the camp' not merely as an index of neoliberal state sovereignty but the 'hidden matrix' on which it rests. For Agamben (1998), the camp – as distinct from what he terms the 'polis' – serves as an extraterritorial spatial container for a biopolitical regime which hinges on naturalising the sovereign 'right' of the state to govern the movement and 'rights' of *Others*, including immigrants and refugees. It is they, Agamben (1998, p. 27) argues, who may be forcibly reduced to a 'limit-figure of life, a threshold in which life is both inside and outside the juridical order'. This 'bare' or 'naked life' is the life of the *homo sacer* – that is, a life in which biology is isolated from biography, stripped of political rights and thus located outside the polis. Under the exceptional 'law of the Jungle', to borrow from Besson's polemical reference to Calais, the refugee as *homo sacer* is thus immobilised on the sovereign – distinctly 'necropolitical' (Mbembe, 2003) – threshold between human and inhuman, even life and death (Minca, 2015).

Yet, while there is no doubt that Agamben's disquieting reading of the camp holds true on a number of fronts, to stop there would be to risk reifying a totalistic, agentless typecasting of the refugee, much as it would be to flatten out the historically-specific relations which contour the everyday fabric of camp life. Absent from an Agambien perspective, after all, is precisely an understanding of the camp as a social and political space – a space thus punctuated not just by immobility, violence and material precarity but by forms of collective resistance and solidarity, even a makeshift sense of community (Agier, 2008, 2010; Isin and Rygiel, 2007; Rygiel, 2011; Redclift, 2013). Seen 'from below' (Papadopoulos et al., 2008, p. 198), then, the camp is also as a space in which informal economies, precarious labor, religious worship as well as sport, art and physical cultural forms contribute to material processes of identity formation, even 'home-making' (Moulds, 2017a). As Rygiel (2011) observes, the numerous acts of closure by French state authorities in Calais might even be read as attempts to render solid the meaning of the camp as a space of bare life rather than one of solidifying social and political relations – the kind of which open up the possibility of reclaiming basic resources, and challenging the punitive regime of camp life.

Crucially, however, the particularities of crisis that manifest in the Calais Jungle also elude any normative reading of humanitarian praxis, and its politico-legal linkage to human rights frameworks<sup>7</sup>. Owing to the French state reticence to designate the site an official refugee camp, the Calais Jungle itself served as a troubling manifestation of a radical crisis of human rights – their much-proclaimed universality belied by the fact that such rights could be repudiated, even routinely violated, within the 'exceptional' sovereign territory of the French nation-state (Lechte and Newman, 2012). As critics such as Arendt (1951) and Agamben (1998) argued, this crisis stems from the fact that human rights doctrines – reaching back to the 1789 *French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* – rest on the biopolitical foundations of the modern state, a process which creates a fracture between those included within the political order of statehood, and those 'stateless' Others, cast-off and without agency, their right to life maintained largely as a humanitarian condition. By the same token, however, just as rights may assume



different ‘faces’, humanitarian action must also be appraised as ‘several things at once’ (Feldman, 2012, p. 156), its rights-based legal instruments, philosophical principles and modes of claims-making translated, co-opted and negotiated by a multitude of state and non-state actors *in situ*. As Hilhorst and Jansen (2012, p. 902) astutely posit, therefore, any sociological examination of humanitarian action must ultimately be a ‘sociology of praxis’ – the challenge being to explicate how humanitarian actors implicitly or explicitly operationalise, repudiate or vernacularise human rights through their differentiated interventions.

In thus turning to the situated realities of the Calais Jungle, we are confronted with the vastly different ideological assumptions and implications of humanitarianism in action (Fassin, 2010; Ticktin, 2014). On the one hand, the French state foreclosure of any right to formal humanitarian intervention might be said to reinforce mounting assertions of an ideologically-compromised ‘state humanitarianism’ (Reiff, 2002), the kind of which is governed by the same neoliberal circuits of capital and power to that of the refugee (Sandri, 2017). On the other hand, however, in the void created by this formal ban, the organic emergence of small-scale grassroots humanitarian initiatives such as Play4Calais, the Refugee Youth Service, Help Refugees and Care4Calais might be said to undercut, even subvert, such formalised constructs of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 1990), their *raison d’être* inextricably bound to the context of the Calais Jungle. In what follows, we seek to locate this latter archetype of grassroots humanitarianism via the organisational praxis of Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service, and the historical coordinates of crisis to which they respond.

**Locating Grassroots Humanitarianism**

Play4Calais is an apolitical grassroots initiative that was founded to bring pop-up cinema, safe play, sports & vital aid to the 10,000 refugees living in the Calais camp, dubbed ‘The Jungle’. With a particular focus on helping the 1000+ women and 1000+ children there, Play4Calais served as a ‘light in the dark’ for these vulnerable people during exceptionally difficult times. With little to do and tensions high, refugees were desperate for respite, care and community building activities to take part in. A few brief hours of escapism through cinema or therapy through art and sports helped people to take their minds off the pain and trauma they’ve already experienced and often continue experiencing – Mission of Play4Calais

Refugee Youth Service is dedicated to the mission of creating immediate and lasting change in the lives of unaccompanied children and young people on the move in Europe. Our work is aimed at providing these young people with safe spaces enabling them to access legal and social support from trained professionals as well as to create an enjoyable place to be allowing them to rest and relax through creative activities and organised sports. This work is paramount to improve the safety and welfare of young refugees – Mission of Refugee Youth Service

In December 2015, distressed by media imagery of a mounting ‘refugee crisis’ in Calais, British actress and human rights activist, Alix Wilton-Regan, established a small-scale humanitarian initiative, Play4Calais. Founded on a shoestring budget, Play4Calais began life as an ‘apolitical’ pop-up cinema initiative for children and families, before its mission progressively expanded to deploying sports, arts and

film as humanitarian resources of hope, escapism and ‘therapy’<sup>8</sup> in the Jungle. Like many of the ‘grassroots’ initiatives that emerged in the aftermath of the French ban on formal refugee assistance, Play4Calais relied largely on the compassionate labor of untrained volunteers who were at once opposed to what Alix termed the ‘brutal, oppressive violence’ of the French state authorities, and committed – as their mission states – to fostering a ‘sense of humanity’ in the Calais Jungle. Founded just a month earlier, in November 2015, the Refugee Youth Service began life as the Baloo Youth Centre, a well-known ‘safe space’ where children could avail of reading material, recreational board games and pool tables, as well as structured sports activities such as football, cricket and volleyball – all of which was framed around an ethos of providing ‘peer to peer solidarity’ with young refugees. Recognizing the dearth of wider child welfare services, the Refugee Youth Service soon expanded its remit to include a child safeguarding program, children’s rights movement, formal educational and leadership classes, as well as the provision of access to legal asylum support and psychological care.

Taken together, both Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service exhibit sociological features which depart from existing humanitarian conventions. Most notably, the informality which marks their distinctly ‘grassroots’ form of humanitarianism serves as a striking alternative to the state humanitarianism which is said to have proliferated under neoliberal regimes (Fassin, 2010; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). Countering such state hegemony, both Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service can be seen to frame their humanitarian ethos around the language of rights. Unencumbered by state bureaucracies, both operate under a self-ascribed authority derived largely from their own moral insistence of the human right to a dignified threshold of life. Such a rights-framing is particularly explicit in the mission of the Refugee Youth Service, which declares that ‘promoting and protecting children’s rights are at the centre of what we do. We actively ensure children and young people are aware of their rights as children and as refugees’. By the same token, the practical interventions of Play4Calais might be said to coalesce around a right to play, as well as the broader ‘cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity’ enshrined within Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in Article 1 of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) ratified Charter of Physical Education and Sport. That said, their *de facto* mobilization of human rights appears more akin to Miller’s (2010) ‘rights-framed’ rather than ‘rights-based’ approach – the distinction being that the former rely on human rights more as an ethico-moral ‘frame of reference’ (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2012, p. 46) than a formal doctrine guiding institutional modes of action.

And yet, notwithstanding such rights-framings, their mutual deployment of sport and arts activities also extends the humanitarian remit into hitherto underexplored territory. In reaching beyond ‘life-saving relief activities’ (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2012, p. 5), both Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service might be said to index what Ilcan and Rygiel (2015) observe as an expansion of humanitarian techniques which seek to reframe the refugee as a resilient, self-governing subject in a reimagined camp community. Indeed, while Ilcan and Rygiel (2015) make no explicit reference to sport or play-based activities, their concern with empowerment, education and escapism as humanitarian techniques parallels the broader claims-

making surrounding sport in the field of development (Coalter, 2013; Darnell, 2012). Much of this claims-making is widely criticized both for ‘evangelical policy rhetoric’ (Coalter, 2010, p. 296) and ‘crudely functionalist’ assertions about sport’s transformative potential, but it is important to note that such criticism is most often centered on the wrongful generalization of micro-level, individualized effects to the macro-societal level. Crucially, the makeshift nature of camp geographies mean that such long-term considerations are of limited concern.

Here, alternatively, with questions of impact bound by a more immediate temporal horizon, humanitarian claims-making has coalesced around sport’s capacity to incentivize education initiatives, to enrich psycho-social interventions, trauma therapy, mental health, life skills, as well as to supplement more enduring efforts towards peace and conflict resolution, social integration and community building. This ever-expanding assemblage of humanitarian-centred sport interventions has been dominated by large-scale international agencies like the UNHCR, who have established partnerships with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), UEFA, Nike, Microsoft, United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Right to Play, and the former United Nations Office for Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP). Much like the related development field, however, while these partnerships have ensured a steady flow of capital support, critics have argued that their tactical mobilization of media-savvy forms of ‘humanitarian branding’ (Vestergaard, 2008) ultimately services the hegemony of neoliberal political interests. Sharply contrasted with this highly mediatized, ‘professionalized’ humanitarian form, then, we now turn to the relatively underexplored grassroots praxis of Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service.

**Politics at Play**

‘Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong’ Ranciere (1999, p. 27)

In February 2016, just weeks after the founding of Play4Calais, Alix witnessed the French authorities’ violent destruction of the few community spaces that existed in the Jungle, including the church, the mosque, the theatre and the Women’s and Children’s Centre. This was followed by the large-scale clearance project that saw the southern part of the Jungle – home to over three thousand inhabitants – flattened over a matter of days. ‘All of these community spaces’, she asserted, ‘were brutally ripped apart in an effort of the French government to depress people, lower morale, move them on, destroy culture, and leave people hopeless’. Amid the anger and soul-searching that followed, however, Alix and the Play4Calais team hatched a plan to counter the oppressive actions of the French state. Several weeks of intensive lobbying later, including protracted negotiations with the local prefecture, the Mayor of Calais, as well as other humanitarian action groups, Play4Calais were successful in forcing through the construction of a new purpose-built sports field on the previously demolished site. A much-publicized official opening in front of invited media and guest donors followed, with the inaugural ‘Calais Camp

Championship' bringing together multinational teams of young refugees kitted out in tee-shirts emblazoned with the words, 'WE ARE HUMAN'.

In *'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?'*, Jacques Ranciere (2004) defends the radical politics that lies in the making of rights-claims. Countering the foreclosure of agency in Agamben and Arendt's work, Ranciere advocates a dynamic view of human rights in which they come alive in and through political struggle over the meaning of space. It is through claims-making, Ranciere suggests, that 'uncounted' subjects may unsettle the terrain of consensus through acts of *'dissensus'* – a calling into question of the given order of things, and a process by which to confront the 'naturalness of a place' attributed to the 'uncounted'. In these terms, the denial of human rights – as a denial of the 'fundamental commonality of the shared life' (Deranty, 2003, pp. 143-144) – may be contested, making visible and audible subjects previously reduced to a state of naked life. As with grassroots humanitarian praxis at large, we argue that Ranciere's politics of dissensus resonates strongly with the politics enacted by Play4Calais in the above encounter – both as a making visible the 'wrong[s]' which legitimate the 'exceptional' state production of the refugee as 'rightless', and just as importantly, by 'setting up a community' united in their attempts to contest, even reconfigure, the spatial possibilities of life in the Calais Jungle.

To further elucidate our point, let us briefly return to the vignettes from the introduction – namely, those which detailed the experiences of Play4Calais as they sought to create a 'safe space' for refugees to participate in sport, cinema and arts activities. Initially locating themselves as apolitical, Play4Calais championed a humanitarian form which hinged on subverting the rational ontologies of a life-in-crisis through the ludic power of play-based physical culture, thus breaking through the tedium which defines individual 'lives of waiting' (Agier, 2012, p. 274) by offering a transitory escape from the 'pain and trauma' of camp life. 'The element of play', as Tommy argued, 'is so valuable to giving people respite from whatever else is going on' – a sentiment which was shared by Ben, a founding member of the Refugee Youth Service:

'Sport has given them a chance to break free from the camp, to forget about the past, the present and the future, to be themselves. You see the stress of everyday life in camp dissipate. It's nice to see kids be kids again, and not have to put on the maturity of being an adult'

In the 'apolitical' vernacular of grassroots humanitarianism, sport thus figures as a vehicle of escapism, even as a 'haven of hope' (Lawrence, 2016). Indeed, for many, the fleeting encounter that saw the French riot police peacefully enjoying the weekly football tournament served as a humanizing index of each. That said, to privilege such valorized stories – and the neat imagery they invoke – would be to understate, even erase, the veritable power dynamics at play between the riot police and refugees, much as it would be to risk reifying mythopoeic constructs of sport's inherent humanitarian value. After all, these same stories also laid bare police-led teargas attacks, violent night raids, forced removals and destruction of belongings – all of which, as constitutive of the dehumanizing 'face' which Zizek (2002, p. 91) discerned, seek to uphold the abject subjectification of the refugee as *homo sacer*, and the camp as 'a space

for naked life’ (Agamben, 2005, p. 41). Herein, however, by intervening in the unequal encounter between riot police and refugees – an encounter, that is, between the ‘exceptional’ power of the sovereign state and the ‘uncounted’ – we argue that the grassroots project of Play4Calais becomes a deeply political project.

After all, within the immobilizing and exclusionary spatialities of the camp, any act of *playing* – long theorized as an affective, metaphysical force opening up humanizing flows of ideas, memories and pre-cognitive capacities (Huizinga, 1955; Shields, 2015) – serves to contest, even subvert, imposed regimes of bare life, brutality and suffering. More than a passive form of ludic expression, then, the very claim to access opportunities to play, let alone the conferment of a ‘right’ to play, engenders a politics of dissensus in Ranciere’s terms – that is, it unsettles or disrupts the formal consensus which renders the claims of refugees ‘uncounted’. As a case in point, consider the inaugural Play4Calais-led ‘Camp Championship’, hosted at the opening of the newly-constructed sports field. By virtue of bringing together young refugees – united in mutual enjoyment, laughter and intense competition, and by the words, ‘WE ARE HUMAN’ – these events can, at the very least, be said to disrupt prevailing constructs of refugees as ‘mere’ victims (See figure 2.), thereby instigating a degree of political struggle over the spatial geographies of camp life.



**Figure 2.** A moment of celebration during Play4Calais’s Football Friday tournament.  
(Source: Adam Corbett, March 2016)

In the weeks after the official opening, as Alix affirms, refugee engagement with – even ownership of – the space of the sports field extended far beyond the vision of Play4Calais:

‘What was quite interesting to observe is that we found that the field was being regularly used [beyond] Football Friday, or Olympic Sports Day on Wednesdays. There was loads of cricket happening, which was fantastic. But people were also using the goalposts to do pull-



ups, and push-ups, so it was a huge success... And it wasn't exclusively male. What I was proud of is that we later came up with the idea to build a smaller playing field with mini goals, and that field was reserved solely for ages 12 and under, and that was predominantly girls, who didn't feel it was appropriate to play football in front of the men. And it was really lovely to see the girls<sup>9</sup> coming along and playing tag, football, frisbee and catching games' (Interview with Alix, Play4Calais)

Seen from below, then, the dissensual politics of grassroots initiatives such as Play4Calais can be said to contest the 'right' to inhabit the camp as a social and political terrain. To borrow from Shields' (2015, p. 317) writing on the transformative politics of play, they provide refugees with the opportunity to 'imagine worlds beyond their own', thus creating spaces - at once material and imagined - in which expressions of hope, compassion and solidarity can be mobilized as 'tools for living' (Feldman, 2012, p. 165). Further still, however, in reaching beyond a spatial politics of struggle, there is evidence that such grassroots interventions also mobilized play, sports and arts activities towards the production of more enduring forms of sociality.

After all, in his seminal text *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga (1955, p. 9) suggests that play figures not solely as a necessary 'life function' for the individual, but as a formative 'culture function' – the expression of which 'satisfies all kinds of communal ideals'. Huizinga argues that it is through the ordering experience of play that inchoate forms of cultural arrangement take shape, often facilitating the congregation of individuals into hitherto unrealized social formations. Perhaps unsurprising given the 'limbo-like state' (Downey, 2009, p. 109) of life in the camp, the Refugee Youth Service noted a distinct preference for formally organized activities among refugees in Calais: '[While] it was always fun... they really appreciated having sport in a structured way – so not just kicking a ball but actually having people organize something that feels a bit more official'. In a similar vein, Play4Calais spoke at length about their active deployment of formal sporting events – including Football Fridays and Olympic Sports Day's – in efforts to foster mutual understanding among the ethnically-diverse and divided communes of the Calais Jungle. 'We knew there had been tension between groups from different communities, different backgrounds, different places', recounted Tommy, who went on caution against the hyper-competitive nature of football, and its past association with the tragic death of a 25-year-old Kurdish refugee following a fight which broke out during a match between the Kurds and Afghans in the Sangatte Centre in 2002.

This tragedy notwithstanding, however, the unrivalled popularity of football meant that it became a near ubiquitous feature of humanitarian intervention in Calais. Alix, in particular, recounted well-worn rhetoric on the game as a 'common language' in bridging the ethno-national divisions which otherwise marked camp geographies:

'Football is an international language, everyone speaks football. Irrespective of your race, your religion or your language, we noticed that everyone is football mad – the Afghans, the Sudanese, the Somalians, the Syrians and Iraqis, they all loved football. It was this common language'



In acknowledging the enforced proximity of camp life, and the ethnic enclaves it engendered, Play4Calais thus endeavored to mobilize the socio-cultural allure of football as a team sport, and as something of a cross-cultural constant that could be harnessed towards the creation of mutual understanding, inter-ethnic ‘mixing’, even friendship:

‘Sometimes when we arrived at the field, we’d find, for example, the Eritreans vs Ethiopians, where they had formed divided teams based on their home countries, and of course people want to feel connected to their roots when they’re so far from home. That said, what was wonderful was that each time we held a Football Friday tournament we mixed up the teams – that was non-negotiable. The teams were always mixed. And it was a great way of building rapport between people from different cultures, a great way of healing old arguments, and moving on from potential difficulties that they’d experienced in the camp. It was a great way of getting people to talk to each other, to laugh with each other, to see how much they have in common. And then, what was great for us was we’d notice that when a team came off the field thirsty and hungry, that team sat down together to eat the fruit, biscuits and water that we’d brought along for them. Suddenly they’re sitting down talking and eating with each other. That’s how you create bonds. And that’s the point, to create friendships that last beyond the realm of the game’ (Interview with Alix, Play4Calais)

‘When you’re actually watching a match and you see people coming together, all laughing and smiling – even people chatting to each other that wouldn’t otherwise be given the opportunity to, it breaks down boundaries... it brings people together. You can be on the same team without having to speak the same language, you can have a totally different background, a totally different set of beliefs. Football was probably one of the few things which allows you to break those barriers’ (Interview with Tommy, Play4Calais)

While Alix and Tommy both acknowledged the ongoing ‘problem’ of inter-ethnic conflicts and the occasional cathartic spillover into Play4Calais-organised events, their conviction in the humanitarian import of sport remained steadfast, even after their departure from the Jungle. Indeed, in Coalter’s (2013) critical lexicon, much of their upbeat claims-making might even be categorized as ‘evangelical’. Yet to privilege such a point of critique, we argue, would ultimately be to detract from, and risk obscuring, the material impact and progressive politicization of their humanitarian action *in situ*. After all, in facilitating the social re-engagement of refugees with a space which previously symbolized the destructive regime of the French state, they not only contested the localized connotations of such a space, but enacted new and situated forms of ‘grassroots’ political membership and participation thereon.

**Conclusion**

Over a matter of days in early October 2016, the French state finally demolished the sprawling residential maze of the Calais Jungle – its makeshift ‘homes’, restaurants and ‘high street’ flattened by bulldozers before outbreaks of fire left only ash and rubble behind. Amid political fallout across Europe, thousands of refugees were transferred to French accommodation centres. Volunteers streamed back across the English Channel, riot police were restationed at migrant camps in Dunkirk, and international media moved on to humanitarian crises elsewhere. At the same time, many grassroots organizations began a process of unmaking. Before long, Play4Calais would relocate to Birmingham to assist newly-

arrived refugees in accessing 'emotional and psychological support, healing and legal help' in their efforts to integrate into British society. Conversely, the Refugee Youth Service established the Mobile Youth Centre to provide outreach support, advice on asylum opportunities, as well as practical services such as access to Wi-Fi and phone charging to the hundreds of unaccompanied minors who fled state authorities to sleep rough in the forests, fields and streets of Calais. In both cases, much of what remained of their original mission was resigned to the collective memories of volunteers, a handful of press clippings and the social networks that emerged during their time in the Jungle. In capturing but partial fragments of these memories, experiences, relationships and lessons, this article has argued that the grassroots praxis of these organizations provide novel insights into the changing geopolitical landscape of the humanitarian condition, and the hitherto underexplored promise of sport, art and cinema therein.

In sharp contrast to the state-centred bureaucracy of the 'humanitarian machine' (Sandri, 2017, p. 13), and the 'professionalized' forms which it has adopted under the neoliberal project, we argue that the comparative informality, spatial proximity and volunteer activism of grassroots humanitarianism engendered new and organic forms of solidarity, even relational being in the Calais Jungle. In the shape-shifting remit of Play4Calais, for example, we are confronted with a 'grassroots' initiative which was not only situated within, but responsive to, the particular exigencies of crisis on-the-ground in Calais. Unencumbered by formalized conventions of aid delivery, these grassroots initiatives came to assume blurred responsibilities between humanitarianism and activism, thus reaching beyond apolitical principles in their opposition to state authorities, and in the making of rights-claims on behalf of refugees.

Yet this is not to moralize grassroots humanitarianism as the compassionate antithesis to large-scale registers of aid delivery, nor do we wish to glorify the largely uncoordinated, adhoc nature of volunteer-based interventions. Rather, the illustrations drawn here are intended to reveal the 'imperfect offering' (Orbinski, 2008) of humanitarianism in its more vernacular forms, bringing into sharp focus both the progressive politicization of grassroots initiatives vis-à-vis the oppressive state prefecture, and the challenge they pose to the 'bare' depoliticized existence of life in the Jungle. Towards this end, Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service shed critical light on the oft-neglected import of sport and leisure forms amid the political negotiation of space, rights and immobility within the 'exceptional' space of refugee camps. Theirs, as we argued in dialogue with Ranciere (1998), may even constitute a politics of dissensus, both in that it challenges the hierarchies of humanness which construct the refugee as *homo sacer*, and opens up the inchoate possibility for political struggle over the 'right' to inhabit such spaces. In their reclamation of the previously demolished space of the sports field, and in their facilitation of play, cinema, sport and arts activities thereon, Play4Calais not only disrupted the violently imposed regime of the French state, but even more importantly, facilitated a temporary re-engagement with the Calais Jungle as a space of solidarity, hope and community, if only for the fleeting duration of the game.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Sandri (2017) notes, Médecins Sans Frontières and Doctors Across Borders were the only formal humanitarian agencies permitted entry to the Calais camp.

<sup>2</sup> Popularly known as Baloo Youth Centre in the Calais site.

<sup>3</sup> Despite having a capacity of 600 people, it is estimated that over 2,000 migrants sought temporary refuge at the Sangatte Centre prior to its closure in December 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Following the closure of the Sangatte Centre, the most prominent of these were local charities such as L'Auberge des Migrants and Secours Catholique, as well as Calais Migrant Solidarity, a division of the activist group, No Borders. Grassroots organisations such as Care4Calais, Help Refugees, Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service emerged post-2014.

<sup>5</sup> In August 2016, a Help Refugees census reported a population of 9,000 people, including approximately 700 unaccompanied minors, the youngest being eight years old, with 20 registered nationalities.

<sup>6</sup> As Moulds (2017a) reveals, under French authorities, only wood, plastics and tarpaulin were permitted to be used for shelter in the Calais camp.

<sup>7</sup> In the case of refugees, this linkage has become explicit in the humanitarian identity of the UNHCR, which draws strongly from a rights-based approach (Hillhorst and Jansen, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> While direct references to 'therapy' emerged in several interviews, it is important to note that, when pressed to elaborate, respondents typically sought to justify these claims by reproducing common rhetoric on the inherently therapeutic 'power' of sport and physical activity. Crucially, such humanitarian rhetoric risks reifying neoliberal narratives of individual healing and resilience rather than recognizing the historical and political production of refugee displacement, maltreatment and suffering.

<sup>9</sup> Alix expressed frustration at the gendered nature of participation in the early sporting activities organised by Play4Calais. 'It was mainly males. Women were encouraged, but we found that teenage girls didn't feel safe enough, and women, culturally speaking, didn't feel it was appropriate to play football in front of the men'. It was only following the construction of the sports field that the Play4Calais team established girls-only sessions, and began to see the inclusion of women and girls in activities such as 'tag, football, frisbee and catching games'.

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